

REITH LECTURES 1979: The African Condition

Ali Mazrui

Lecture 4: The Burden of Underdevelopment

TRANSMISSION: 28 November 1979 – Radio 4

Estimates of Africa's resources are on the whole tentative, but it is already fair to say that Africa has 96 per cent of the non-Communist world's diamonds, 60 per cent of its gold, 42 per cent of its cobalt, 34 per cent of its bauxite and 28 per cent of its uranium. The West's interest in Africa's oil has also significantly increased, partly in proportion to the political uncertainties surrounding the Middle Eastern suppliers. Had Nigeria joined the Arab oil embargo of the United States in 1973 the consequences for America would have been severe. In 1974—the year following the embargo—the United States' balance of payments deficit with Nigeria was already three billion dollars. It rose to five billion dollars two years later. For the time being, America's dependence on Nigerian oil continues to be critical. Then there is Africa's agricultural potential. The Sudan, Africa's largest country in square miles, may indeed develop into a major bread-basket for parts of Africa and the Middle East before the end of this century. There are also Africa's water resources, with some of the greatest rivers of the world. The potential for building dams and generating hydro-electric power has only just begun to be exploited. In short, the continent itself seems to be well endowed with resources, but a disproportionate number of people in the population of the continent are undernourished and underprivileged, a situation of anomalous underdevelopment.

A substantial part of the explanation lies in the nature of Africa's economic links with the Western world across time. Trade is the oldest of the different areas of economic interaction. Afro-European trade goes back to the slave trade and to the traffic in firearms, and beyond. In subsequent years there was also investment in Africa's mineral and agricultural wealth and sources of power and energy. This grew at a modest pace until the Second World War. The war itself was an important divide in Africa's history. It helped to liberate the continent politically, but it also enslaved it economically. The political liberation was achieved partly by undermining Western Europe's capacity to hold on to empires. Britain was exhausted and substantially impoverished by the time the war ended. France had been humiliated in defeat at the hands of the Germans.

Related to all this was the destruction of the myth of European invincibility in the eyes of the colonised peoples. Suddenly somebody in Bombay noticed that the emperor's new clothes of modern technology were not clothes at all—the British Raj was naked! And when the Indians started pointing fingers and exposing the nakedness of their emperor other subject peoples elsewhere saw it too. The precedent set by India in challenging British rule became an important inspiration to many African nationalists. At a more individual level the war also cut the white man down to size in African eyes. The colonised Africans had had their humanity reduced because they were regarded as part devils and part monkeys. They certainly had their adulthood reduced when they were often equated with children. As I was growing up in Mombasa in the

1940s the film censors declared some films as being 'not suitable for Africans and children under 16'. Since the population of Mombasa was in part racially mixed, and many Arabs looked like Africans, there were two kinds of identification test at the door of the cinema: you either had to persuade the ticket clerk that you were really an Arab, or that you were 16. This equation of Africanity with childhood began to be upset as a result of war experiences and the role of African soldiers in combat as brave and determined adults.

On the other hand, Europeans had been portrayed as super-adults and virtually superhuman. The war, too, humanised white men in the eyes of their African colleagues as they fought together in the Horn of Africa, in North Africa, in Malaya and elsewhere. To observe a white man scared to death under fire was itself a revelation to many Africans, who had previously seen white men only in their arrogant commanding posture as a colonial elite. Another effect of the war was to broaden the general social and political horizons not only of ex-servicemen but of many Africans who had remained behind.

It was clear, as I grew up, that my father and his friends regarded the contending forces in Europe partly as soccer teams writ large, and the Africans—the fans, if you like—were placing their bets on the European powers at war with one another. East Africa had, of course, once known both German rule in Tanganyika, Rwanda and Burundi, and British rule in Uganda and Kenya. The two colonial and former colonial powers at war with each other were, on the one hand, ominous masters, and on the other, frivolous soccer teams in deadly rivalry with each other.

But the very fact that my father and his friends debated the progress of the war almost as if it were the progress of a football match increased their interest in world affairs and broadened their vision of human possibilities. For millions of Africans all over the continent the Second World War was an important internationalising experience. By the end of it many of them were ready to agitate for freedom and independence.

The principal consequence of the war was that the pinnacle of world power was no longer in Western Europe but divided between Washington and Moscow. The two superpowers both had a tradition of anti-imperialism in at least some sense, though both are also guilty of other forms of imperialism. What is clear is that the rise of the Soviet Union and the pre-eminence of the United States after the Second World War created pressures on European powers to make concessions to African nationalists struggling for independence.

Paradoxically, the economic impact of the war was enslaving rather than liberating. Partly in pursuit of war needs African agriculture was modified to produce urgently needed supplies and food for Europe. In some parts of Africa there was a major depression later on when war demand for African-produced goods declined, but the structure of African agriculture had by then already entered a new phase of export bias. The war also helped to transform colonial policy from the morality of maintaining law and order in Africa (Pax Britannica) to a new imperial morality of increasing development in the colonies and pursuing the welfare of the colonised people. Britain established the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund as part of this new machinery of the imperial Vision.

But these thrusts of development were themselves a further aggravation of Africa's incorporation into Western capitalism. The Colonial Development and Welfare Fund contributed in its own way towards deepening both Africa's economic dependency on the West and Africa's cultural imitation of the West. Cash crops for export were given priority as against food for local people. One-quarter to one-third of the total cultivated area in some of the more fertile colonies was devoted to the production of such export commodities as cocoa in Ghana, coffee in Uganda, groundnuts in Senegal and the Gambia, pyrethrum in Tanganyika, and tea in Kenya.

The urban bias was another distortion which occurred in the development process. Much of the economic change, internally, subordinated the needs of the countryside to the needs of the towns. One consequence was the volume of migration from rural areas to urban centres. The crisis of habitability continued to beset the lot of the country folk. Young men struggled for a while, - then downed their tools and hit the high road towards the uncertain fortunes of the capital city.

A third bias within each country was the sub-regional distortion. Some parts of the country were just much more developed than others. This burden of uneven development had its own stresses and strains. By being more developed than its neighbours the Buganda sub-region of Uganda, for example, acquired not only extra leverage but also attracted the passionate jealousies, the distrust, of other parts of the country.

Development in Africa has also been distorted by the economic activity of white settlers. In 1938, out of a total of more than £1,000 million invested in the continent from outside, no less than half was invested in South Africa. A further £102 million was invested in Rhodesia. These countries under white-settler control acquired, in addition, considerable economic muscle in their own parts of the continent, with leverage over their neighbours. Rhodesia exercised considerable economic influence over Zambia, Malawi, Botswana and Mozambique.

The fifth bias in Africa's development takes us back to capitalism, for, in this case, we are dealing with the capitalist focus of Africa's recent economic history - absorption into international structures of trade and capital flows, belief in the efficacy of market forces, faith in the profit motive and private enterprise, distrust of state initiatives in the economy, and optimism about the development value of foreign investment. It is partly the nature of these biases in the history of economic change in the continent that has condemned Africa to its present state of underdevelopment.

So what can be done to help Africa get out of this predicament? Can it modernise without Westernising? I would define modernisation as change in a direction which is compatible with the present stage of human knowledge, and which does justice to the human person as an innovative and social being. If a society does not want to take into account present-day levels of knowledge, science and scholarship, that society is pre-modern. If a society suppresses innovation, and insists on doing things according only to tradition, again that society is pre-modern. If a society interprets the concept of man as a social being too narrowly; limiting social loyalties to clans and tribes or even just to nations, and it turns its back on the outer world of fellow human beings, that society is still pre-modern. If you define modernity, then, according to these three basic principles of responsiveness to the highest levels of knowledge, encouragement

of innovation, and enlargement of social sympathies, there are clearly different roads to modernity.

For the Third World the best way forward is to adopt those three principles of modernity on the one hand and, on the other, to pursue strategies of decolonisation and of reducing dependency. It is a dual effort—to modernise and decolonise at the same time. In a sense, it is an effort to decolonise modernity.

How can we marry these principles to strategies of decolonisation and liberation? I think there are a number of possibilities. The first is to some extent already under way: the strategy of indigenisation, of using local manpower and other local resources as far as possible. Africa must also have greater use of its traditional technology and know-how. The struggle for simpler forms of technology is part of the process of reducing reliance on outsiders for sophisticated know-how. In recent times there has been increased interest in traditional African medicine, for example, with special reference to some of the effective herbs which were used in therapy.

My second way of transcending dependency is what I call the strategy of domestication. This involves making a resource which is foreign more relevant and more appropriate for the African situation. For example, Parliament in Nairobi is in conception a foreign institution. It has all the paraphernalia of Parliament at Westminster but without the sanctity of tradition, without the stamp of authenticity. But when the late President Kenyatta ordered that deliberations in the Kenyan Parliament were from 1974 to be in Kiswahili instead of in English this was a major stage in the domestication of the parliamentary institution in Kenya. Anomalies have remained. The language of debate is indeed Kiswahili but the laws which come before Parliament are couched in the English language. The official language of the constitution when it is being interpreted in the law courts is English, but the basic language of national politics is Kiswahili.

Then there is the domestication of the economy. This involves a reduction of its export-orientation, and an enhancement of the focus on domestic food needs and other local requirements. Sometimes emphasising labour-intensive technology instead of capital-intensive is itself a form of domesticating the techniques of production, distribution, communication and exchange. Labour-intensive technology is a form of democratising modernity, involving more and more people in the process of modern production, and utilising a major resource of even the poorest of the African countries - the human resource.

My third strategy for transcending dependency is diversification. I start from the premise that there are occasions when freedom begins with the multiplication of one's masters. To be dependent on two giants, especially when the giants are rivals, is sometimes an opportunity to play one against the other—and maximise one's own options.

African societies must therefore diversify and sometimes multiply their trading partners. This at times may require that they also diversify what they produce, avoiding the dangers that arise from being dependent on one or two commodities. There is also the need to diversify one's investors. French-speaking countries tend to be excessively preoccupied with encouraging French investment instead of trying to

attract other investors as well. To that extent their freedom of manoeuvre is more restricted. Then there is the need to diversify one's aid donors. Multilateral aid affords more latitude than bilateral aid, and having diverse benefactors can be more liberating than being dependent on only one source of support. OPEC has now become one additional source of aid for developing countries—thus increasing their options.

Ideologically, Africa also needs to diversify its options. Many African countries are closed ideological systems at the moment. This perpetuates mental and intellectual dependency. They should be open enough to let contending ideological forces compete for influence. Western individualism, Marxist class concepts, Gandhian ideas of compromise, as well as traditional values underpinning African cultures themselves, all these should be let loose on the free market of ideas.

My fourth strategy of liberation for transcending dependency is co-operation and trade among the developing countries themselves—that is, among the underprivileged. Until now the bulk of trade has been between the rich industrialised countries of the Northern Hemisphere, what I would call north-north trade. Second in importance is the economic interaction between the Northern Hemisphere and the developing countries (north-south trade). Only third in importance is trade, investment and aid among developing countries themselves, or south-south economic interaction. Egypt's and India's export of manpower to other developing countries, the Arab world's aid to African and Asian countries, and Cuba's military assistance to such countries as Angola and Ethiopia—all these illustrate the possibilities. The acceleration of this trend is an important aspect of the whole struggle against dependency.

The next step beyond this is the strategy of what I call counter-penetration into the citadels of power. The Third World must increase its share in the economies of the developed industrial nations themselves, and therefore enhance Third World leverage over those economies. For decades the Middle East, for example, was controlled by others, partly because of its oil. And then a number of countries, realising the importance of this asset, formed a producers' cartel, OPEC, and before very long a resource which had caused them to be subjugated became a weapon in their hands—a weapon capable of being wielded against the very imperial powers that had once dominated them.

Of course oil is an exceptional case. It is a very forceful weapon to use against the industrial nations. But my generalisation still stands. The spirit of counter-penetration by the Third World into the Northern Hemisphere must begin with a re-evaluation by the Third World of how best to utilise their own resources and gain maximum influence over international events. At least as important is the need for Third World countries, including members of OPEC, to maintain a sense of solidarity against the industrial nations. I am not myself disturbed when members of OPEC invest or buy shares in Krupp industries in Germany, or Kuwait seeks a portion of the Benz bonanza, or Saudi princes invest in real estate in London or in California, or when Nigerian funds are carefully placed in Western banks. All this is what counter-penetration is about. If Nigeria had not discovered that its oil could be a weapon in promoting enlightened Western policies for Southern Africa, and if Nigeria had not counter-penetrated Western economies, the impact that Lagos has had on Western policy-making would have been considerably reduced.

I do not agree therefore with those scholars and analysts who feel the Third World should actually disengage from the international capitalist system. It is too late to disengage. The industrialised countries could gradually destroy the world through pollution and other forms of ecological damage, or impoverish it by an indiscriminate or even reckless depletion of resources. Third World countries simply cannot afford to pull out of the system. The gains which OPEC has enabled the Third World to make must not be thrown away in a mood of militant abdication and withdrawal.

Economic liberation also depends on austerity in the Third World. Limited local resources must not be wasted, and there should be greater restraint on the importation of luxury goods. The gap must be narrowed between the elite and the masses. There must be a strategy of income distribution and, where appropriate, land reform. But the austerity needn't go to the extent of hampering the satisfaction of basic human needs. Efforts should be made to make possible minimum nutrition levels, minimum health care, minimum educational opportunities for children and the like.

But ultimately the push in each developing country should be in the direction of discipline, restraint and austerity. I know that is easier said than done, but experiments are already under way in places like Tanzania, Somalia, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. Side by side with this policy of southern austerity we should encourage northern extravagance for the time being. In the short term at least it would be disastrous for the Third World if the United States and its allies actually succeeded in making a real cut in oil consumption. An America self-sufficient in oil is an America invulnerable to external pressures.

True interdependence in the world requires mutual vulnerability to one another's pressures. If the northern industrialised countries can play havoc with the economies of the Third World just by drinking less coffee than they have done the previous year, or by using less copper this decade than the last, it is vital that the Southern Hemisphere should also find ways of holding the industrialised nations to ransom if need be. I am not just talking about using resources which can be consumed. Imagine for a moment the power of gold in the hands of a black South African government. Think how easily that could be used to de-stabilise the international monetary order. That's what I'm talking about.

Bertrand Russell used to say that civilisation was born out of the pursuit of luxury. He might have added that civilisation sometimes declines out of the pursuit of excessive luxury. The current extravagance in the consumption of oil in the United States, and even the exceptionally high standard of living in Western Europe as a whole, might have reached the stage of excessive luxury. The decline of Western civilisation might well be at hand. It is in the interests of humanity that such a decline should take place. This would allow the different segments of the human race to enjoy a more equitable share, not only of the resources of the planet, but also of the power to control its future.